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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000076

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 5/29/2018

TAGS: PHUM PREL KIRF SOCI CH TH

SUBJECT: CHINA-FOCUSED CHRISTIAN GROUP CAUGHT UP IN PRC'S POST-TIBET UNREST CRACKDOWN

REF: 07 CHIANG MAI 139 (GOING GETTER TOUGHER IN WESTERN CHINA)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, Consul General, CG, Chiang Mai.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶11. (C) The "Friends of China" (FOC) NGO - which has been placing teachers and rural developmental workers in China for 20 years - reports that Beijing authorities recently shut down its office in Qinghai Province that oversees assistance projects with ethnic Tibetans there. FOC believes this is part of larger PRC crackdown on Tibet-focused NGOs. The group reports that registration and visa requirements have gotten stricter for its operations throughout China, but is hoping things will ease up after the Olympics, provided the Games go well. FOC is waiting until that time to seek Beijing's permission to launch rural development activities in the ethnic Hui Muslim-majority Ningxia Province. FOC is currently working with the PRC's Chinese Friendship Association on plans for rebuilding schools destroyed in the recent earthquake in Sichuan Province. End Summary.

FOC: 20-Year Track Record in China

¶12. (SBU) CG met May 27 with Norwegian Gunnar Boe (protect), head of the Chiang Mai office of the "Friends of China" (FOC). FOC is a Christian - but not missionary - group that has been placing teachers and developmental workers in China for 20 years. FOC's China headquarters is in Chengdu, and its external headquarters moved from Hong Kong to Chiang Mai in 1997.

Tibet-Related Operations Shut Down

¶13. (C) We asked Boe whether FOC had experienced any significant operational changes since our previous meeting last August (reftel). He replied that FOC had recently been forced by Chinese authorities to close its office in Qinghai Province, which has a significant ethnic Tibetan population and borders the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The office's registration was up for renewal last month, and the authorities simply refused to renew it. Boe noted that this happened not long after unrest began in Tibetan areas of China in March. He speculated that this was part of a larger PRC crackdown on foreign, Tibet-focused NGOs, claiming that PRC authorities had also recently closed down operations in the region of two other NGOs:

-- the Trace Foundation, a New York-based group with field offices in China promoting Tibetan culture and development; and
-- the Bridge Fund, which does many assistance projects in Tibet.

(Note: According to Consulate Chengdu, both Trace Foundation and Bridge Fund offices remain open in Chengdu, although Trace Foundation seems to have come under pressure to suspend its activities in Sichuan and the TAR. Trace Foundation may be operating projects in Tibetan areas of Qinghai Province, however. Foreign NGOs in Tibetan areas in general have been under pressure for a number of years and likely increased scrutiny since March 14 as well. Formal registration has been a consistent problem for foreign NGOs operating in Tibetan areas and many resort to creative solutions to keep operating, such as registering as private businesses. See Chengdu 61. End Note).

¶14. (C) Boe explained that, while FOC is neither Buddhist nor Tibet-focused, its volunteers in Qinghai in many cases worked with ethnic Tibetans, mostly on rural development projects. Despite the closing of the FOC office in Qinghai, the individual volunteers, or "associates," have been allowed to remain for now. However, many of them have their visas up for renewal later this summer, so "we'll see what happens," Boe said.

Stricter Scrutiny Across China

¶15. (C) Across China, Boe said, FOC has found it more difficult to operate since about a year ago, when the central government took over from local governments responsibility for registering foreign NGOs. FOC's operational difficulties in western China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, reported to us last August (reftel), have not gotten any better. Boe noted ironically that local officials do not always see eye-to-eye with central government authorities on the issue of foreign NGOs. In

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Xinjiang, for example, universities have asked FOC to provide more English teachers, but Beijing has denied visas to the associates FOC has tried to send.

¶16. (C) Notwithstanding this, FOC is still generally able to get visas for its Chiang Mai-based staff from the Chinese Consulate General here, Boe said. In recent months, however, the Consulate has required applicants to provide far more documentation than in the past. Boe said Chiang Mai-based tourist agencies have also complained about stricter documentation requirements and longer processing times for the tourist visas they seek for their clients. As a result of this stricter scrutiny, FOC recently stopped applying for visas for its associates at China's Chiang Mai Consulate, and instead requires them to apply in their country of residence.

Post-Olympics Thaw?

¶17. (C) FOC's Chengdu headquarters recently approached local authorities in Ningxia Province, a largely ethnic Hui Muslim region, to offer assistance in rural sustainable development, Boe said. The provincial officials have responded favorably. FOC will move cautiously in approaching Beijing for permission by waiting until after the August Olympics. Boe speculated that, if the Olympics go well, the Chinese will likely ease up on foreign NGO registration and activity. If, however, the Olympics do not go well and the government loses face, Boe anticipates a tough time for his and other groups.

Earthquake Relief

¶18. (SBU) FOC has donated a few tens of thousands of dollars to the Red Cross for earthquake relief in China, Boe reported. The

group has also sent some doctors into the afflicted areas. FOC is more focused, however, on longer-term needs, such as rebuilding schools, and has already begun to engage the PRC's Chinese Friendship Association on needs assessments.

On the Move

¶9. (SBU) FOC currently has about 160 associates placed in China, about half of whom are Americans, Boe said. Chiang Mai serves as a convenient and low-cost administrative center for FOC. Boe is not aware of any other Christian groups that are operating in China out of Chiang Mai, but said the Jian Hua Foundation, which places medical, developmental, and educational professionals in China, recently sent a team to check out Chiang Mai as a possible lower-cost alternative to its current Hong Kong base.

¶10. (SBU) Boe's two-year assignment to Chiang Mai ends in June, after which he and his family will return to Norway, where he is a telecoms engineer. His replacement as FOC Assistant Executive Director has been named, but will be based in the Chengdu office along with the Executive Director. FOC will retain a five-person administrative support staff in Chiang Mai.

Comment

¶11. (C) Despite its recent setback in Qinghai Province, FOC is likely to continue to operate in China as it has for the last two decades: quietly moving into and out of various regions depending on the temperature readings it gets from central and local authorities. The group is hopeful that a smooth-running Olympic Games will generate a "warm" temperature favorable for foreign NGO access to areas not currently reached.

¶12. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Beijing and ConGen Chengdu.

MORROW